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Examining The Rise and Role of College Athletics as a Business:

Brand Management and Brand Power in Division I Intercollegiate Athletics

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Examining The Rise and Role of College Athletics as a Business:

Brand Management and Brand Power in Division I Intercollegiate Athletics

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Professional Report

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Examining The Rise and Role of College Athletics as a Business:

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This paper seeks to examine how major college athletics have grown into a billion dollar industry, and the way businesses, advertisers and the schools themselves can effectively grow their brands. By understanding the theoretical framework referenced by the social identity theory, disposition theory and identity through mass media, this paper offers a look into the reasoning for America's strong affinity towards college athletics. Resulting in a mass market for intercollegiate sports delivered though various media outlets, and the business models that conferences and television networks operate in an effort to capitalize on their demand. In addition, the observation and analysis for organizational dissension between conferences and membership is explored in order to better understand the reasoning for shifts between university teams and conferences.

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INTRODUCTION

On November 6, 1869 a crowd of a few hundred gathered in New Brunswick, New Jersey to watch a small group of students from Rutgers and Princeton Universities, take place in an athletic competition vaguely resembling what we know today as American football. On September 30, 1939, a contest featuring Fordham University and Waynesburg College was broadcast on a small signal on WNBC in New York. The event itself was of little not to those in the area, much less as a groundbreaking landmark in the history of sports and television. Seventy-one years later, The Universities of Alabama and Texas played for the Bowl Championship Series National Championship before a capacity crowd of a 94,906 at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena California, along with an estimated television audience of 30.78 million people around the United States and Canada. College football has long been a profit generating industry full of history and passion, with the power to divide entire states and polarize families. Interestingly enough, athletics are almost never viewed as a core establishment of a university's mission or central purpose, yet they are easily the most visible element of an institution (Dooley, 2010). An individual in any part of the country, in all probability could tell you very little about the key research and contributions to the academic and scientific communities that the University of Florida produces on a yearly basis, but ask them about that school's football team and they're likely to tell you about how strong the "Gators" look this year.

Universities' athletic departments are highly pressured to produce winning teams. On field success can lead to improved recognition, greater visibility and reach, and increased revenue. It is important to note that of all the athletics programs and teams that a university can field, only football and men's basketball traditionally turn a profit. In many instances, it is football exclusively that accomplishes this goal (O'Keefe, 2007). Athletic departments are separate entities from their respective universities, and the task of financial support for the non-profit sports generally falls to football and men's basketball. Television network contracts pay hundreds of millions of dollars for the rights to broadcast conference and individual team games, seeking an increase in viewership and advertising revenue.

Following the concepts of social identity theory, disposition theory and identity through sports media, we can investigate the reasoning behind the fascination and obsession that comes with college athletics, specifically football and men's basketball and the profuse amounts of money that surround them. Through exploration of the way sports and athletic conference affiliation help shape the identities of colleges and universities, a better understanding of the desire of the general public for an expanding sports media landscape can be developed. Furthermore, examination of different organizational structures, from that of an athletic department to the bureaucratic constitution of an athletic conference, is vital in understanding conflicts that arise between universities and the various leagues to which they belong. Recent shuffling by schools to and from differing conferences in order to elevate their athletic and academic statuses, marketing opportunities, reach and overall revenue stream, has led to a new era in college athletics. One that is seeing teams, athletes, coaches and conferences reach a higher profile than ever before. Philosophies such as conflict theory, as well as organizational management and public relations conceptualization, can help organizations handle the various problems that they may face.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Sponsorship

As college athletics have grown, so has their marketability. Advertisers and sponsors have flocked to align their products with teams that personify excellence and carry a massive following of fans with disposable income. Colleges generate millions licensing their image to clothing and novelty manufacturers, with the most profitable names being the ones entrenched in successful athletics (http://www.clc.com, 2010). The concept has grown to include entire conferences, nicknames, and individual contests such as rivalries and bowl games.

Almost every college athletic program has a sponsorship/licensing endorsement with an athletic company to produce "authentic" game-day attire (Nike, Adidas, etc.). For a fee, the company can be the sole athletic provider for a program, supplying them with uniforms, apparel, and training equipment, in exchange for association with their athletic program (see **Figure 1**). Licensing rights can ensure that a company is the "official" brand of a program, sometimes resulting in exclusivity in certain forums (Yastine, 2007). Sponsorship remains a popular and practical way for companies to align themselves alongside something desirable, be it a stadium, athletic program, individual game (see **Figure 2**), or conference. Almost every collegiate stadium/arena in the country is decorated with signage and an overflow of reminders showcasing the institution's corporate partners **(see Figure 3).**

After the University of Texas's national championship in football during the 2004-2005 season, their licensing revenue alone equaled approximately eight million dollars (Reister, 2009). With over 115 Division I teams competing in football alone, the opportunity to raise revenue through sponsorship and licensing is an increasingly growing part of the business of college athletics.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

The Bowl Championship Series

In 1901, college football wished to showcase a game between top teams from both the East and West coasts. In conjunction with the Tournament of Roses parade committee, a game between top ranked Michigan representing the East, and Stanford University of the West, was arranged for New Years Day 1902 (http://www.tournamentofroses.com, 2010). The game was so lopsided in Michigan's favor, Stanford forfeited after three quarters, causing the Tournament of Roses not to orchestrate another football game as part of their festivities until 14 years later when Washington State University defeated Brown University in what was known as the first annual Rose Bowl (http://www.tournamentofroses.com, 2010)**.** The long and storied custom of college football's "bowl" system had begun. Since then many bowls have come and gone, and several, such as the Sugar and Fiesta Bowls have become staples of the New Year's holiday.

Unlike all other collegiate, amateur and professional sports, NCAA Division I football's bowl system, arranges a postseason in which individual games, pit teams from different conferences against each other at neutral sites. Over the years, conferences and supervising committee's representing various bowl games developed relationships to ensure teams from various conferences would be contractually obligated to play in certain bowls, usually based on performance and league rank. For example, a long-standing agreement was that the winner of the Pac 10 would always play the winner of the Big Ten in the annual Rose Bowl game (http://www.tournamentofroses.com, 2010). Nicknamed "The Granddaddy of Them All", the Rose Bowl has grown a reputation as one of the most prestigious and desirable bowls a team can participate in. While bowl games have overall been a very popular and longstanding part of college football, the increasingly high number of matchups saturated with mediocre teams and mass commercialization, has led to criticism of the system. What was once seen as a great honor to be invited to participate in a bowl game has lost some of its merit. The 2001 New Orleans Bowl featured the 6-5 Colorado State Rams playing the 5-6 North Texas Mean Green. Even with a losing record, North Texas was the champion of the Sun Belt conference therefore negating the rule that a team must have at least six wins and a non-losing record to participate in a bowl game (Allen, 2010). Further contempt for the bowl system stems from the NCAA's unorthodox way of crowning a national champion, which relies on national Polls such as the Associated Press (AP) Poll, and the ESPN/USA Today Coaches Poll. Due to the absence of an NCAA sanctioned event to decide a champion, coupled with multiple outlets authorized to award their own national champion, there have been several times when a "split national championship" was bestowed upon one or more teams. The most recent instance occurred in 1997 when both the Universities of Nebraska and Michigan finished their seasons undefeated, leading to a number one ranking for Nebraska in the ESPN/USA Today poll and likewise for Michigan by the AP poll. With Michigan's contractual obligation to play in the Rose Bowl as the champion of the Big Ten, and Nebraska's duty to represent the Big 12 in the Orange Bowl, the two teams were unable to play one another despite being clearly the two best teams in the country. The same type of incident occurred in 1992 with the Universities of Washington and Miami, proving that this was a growing problem rather than just an anomaly.

In a previous effort to address these problems, a coalition was formed in 1992 between five conferences (The ACC, Big 8, Big East, SEC and SWC), independent Notre Dame, and six bowl games (Cotton, Fiesta, Gator, John Hancock, Orange and Sugar bowls) (http://www.bcsfootball.org, 2010). The idea was to force a de facto national championship game, however it did not include the Pac 10, Big Ten or Rose Bowl game. The coalition was restructured into the Bowl Alliance in 1995, and an agreement was reached that the championship game would rotate between the Fiesta, Orange and Sugar bowls (http://www.bcsfootball.org, 2010). However, the validity of this decision was still in question without the cooperation of the two missing power conferences and the prominent Rose Bowl game. Finally, after the 1997 split champion controversy, the Pac 10 and Big Ten agreed to loosen their hold on the Rose Bowl and join a new structure of the Bowl Alliance, which would include the Rose Bowl as part of its membership. In exchange, the Rose Bowl would keep its time slot on New Year's Day (http://www.bcsfootball.org, 2010). This newest evolution of the bowl coalition was titled the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) and would set the groundwork for the current system in place.

In 2007, a fifth game was added to the slate and deemed the BCS National Championship Game, to be played a week later, at the same site as the BCS bowl who's turn it was to host the title game (http://www.bcsfootball.org, 2010). The BCS was now official consisting of 6 automatic qualifying conferences and 5 non-automatic qualifying conferences. Using a composite polling system, the BCS established its own rankings to determine the top two teams who would meet in the BCS Championship. The standings take into account various computer programs that place teams according to wins, losses, strength of schedule, and margin of victory. Selection for BCS games is based on an intricate system of rules seen here (http://www.bcsfootball.org, 2010):

- The top two teams are given automatic berths in the BCS National Championship Game
- The champions of BCS automatic qualifying conferences (ACC, Big 12, Big East, Big Ten, SEC) are guaranteed an automatic BCS bowl bid
- Independent Notre Dame will receive an automatic berth should it finish in the top eight

- The highest-ranked champion of a non-automatic qualifying BCS conference will receive an automatic berth if:
    - It is ranked in the top 12, or
    - Ranked in the top 16 and higher than at least one BCS conference champion
- No more than one team from a non-automatic qualifying conference can earn an automatic berth in any year; however, a second team from one of these conferences may qualify as a BCS at-large
- No more than two teams from any one conference may receive berths in BCS games unless two non-champions from a BCS conference finish as the top two teams in the final BCS standings, in which case they will meet in the National Title Game while their conference champion will play in their conference's BCS bowl game
- The third-ranked team will receive an automatic berth if it has not already received one, if it is a member of a BCS conference, and provided that its conference has not already earned two automatic berths, if there is room
- If the third-ranked team did not require a berth using the previous provision, then the fourth-ranked team will receive an automatic berth if it has not already received one, if it is a member of a BCS conference, and provided that its conference has not already earned two automatic berths, if there is room
- After the automatic berths have been granted, the remaining slots, known as "at-large" berths, are filled from a pool of teams who are ranked in the top 14 and have at least nine wins. The individual bowl committees determine the actual teams that are chosen for the at-large berths

- If fewer than 10 teams are eligible for selection, then an at-large team will be any Football Bowl Subdivision (formerly Division 1-A) team that is bowl-eligible, has won at least nine regular-season games, and is among the top 18 teams in the final BCS Standings, though any at-large team ranked in the top 14 will be guaranteed a bid over at-large teams ranked lower than 14th.
- If fewer than 10 teams are eligible after expanding the at-large pool to 18 teams, then the at-large pool will continue to be expanded by four additional positions in the BCS Standings until 10 or more teams are eligible.
    - (No team ranked lower than 14 has used this rule to earn an at-large bid, although several teams ranked lower than 14 have received a bid for winning their conference, as the rule was not in place in the early years of the BCS) (http://www.bcsfootball.org, 2010).

All BCS conferences except the Big East have contracts for their champions to participate in specific BCS bowl games, unless that champion is ranked in the BCS top two and involved in the BCS National Championship game. The conference tie-ins are as follows:

- Rose Bowl - Big Ten champion vs. Pac-10 champion
- Fiesta Bowl - Big 12 champion
- Orange Bowl - ACC champion
- Sugar Bowl - SEC champion

While the BCS has garnered support and been effective in placing the two teams it deems as the best in the nation, it has also been highly criticized by supporters for a playoff system. The BCS was even threatened by lawsuits in 2008 when the University of Utah, at the time a member of the non-automatic qualifying Mountain West Conference, went undefeated in the regular season, but was not selected for the national championship game. Passed over in favor of traditional powers Florida and Ohio State. Relegated to the Sugar Bowl, Utah defeated another power, Alabama, and threatened to sue claiming the BCS was acting as a cartel and preventing non-automatic qualifier schools from being fairly considered for the national championship game (Adair, 2009). The proposed lawsuit also focused on anti-trust claims that the BCS would be providing upwards of $900 million dollars in revenue to the six automatic qualifying conferences, as opposed to a mere $42 million to the non-automatic qualifiers over the span of the current eight year contract (Glier, 2003). The BCS remains a polarizing entity, however opposition has not been able to harvest enough support for a playoff system due to the logistical problems it would entail. The controversy has even reached the political level in Washington DC, when the proposed Utah lawsuit enlisted the involvement of Senator Orrin Hatch (R-Utah). President Barack Obama has even stated his desire for a playoff system, however at this point it is not a legislative priority (McCarthy, 2008).

"The Big Six"

While there are actually 11 conferences that comprise the Bowl Championship Series, there are six automatic qualifying conferences. These "power conferences" each offer strengths, weaknesses, a shared sense of camaraderie and rivalry, history and culture. For football, the champion of each conference is guaranteed a spot in the Bowl Championship Series (www.bcsfootball.org, 2010). The automatic qualifier conferences are listed below along with distinguishable features:

- **Atlantic Coast Conference** – 12-team conference predominantly spanning the Eastern coastline of the United States; founded in 1953
- **Big East Conference** – 16-team conference[1] (8 in football) located primarily in the Northeast region of the United States, widely considered the strongest basketball conference; founded in 1979
- **Big Ten Conference** – 11-team conference, situated in the Northern Midwest; it is the oldest collegiate athletic conference having originated in 1895 as the "Western Conference"
- **Big 12 Conference** – 12-team conference consisting of schools located in the Midwest and Texas[2]; the youngest of the "power" conferences, formed in 1996 after the merger of the now defunct Big 8 and Southwest Conferences
- **Pacific 10 Conference –** 10-team conference located primarily on the United States West Coast[3]; originated in 1915 as the Pacific Coast Conference and held various other titles until settling as the Pac 10 in 1978 with its current membership
- **Southeastern Conference –** 12-member conference across the Southeastern region of the United States; founded in 1932 after the breakup of the Southern Conference

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[1] On November 30, 2010, Texas Christian University, accepted a bid to become the 17th overall member and 9th in football for the Big East Conference. Effective July 1, 2012. TCU was previously a member in the non automatic qualifying Mountain West Conference

[2] Note, at the time of this report the Big 12 is in its last season as a 12-team league as both the University of Nebraska and the University of Colorado are departing for new conference affiliation (Nebraska - Big Ten and Colorado - Pac Ten) at the end of the 2010-2011 academic year.

[3] The Pac 10 will officially become the Pac 12 for the 2011-2012 season following the addition of the University of Colorado at the end of the 2010-2011 season and the University of Utah after the 2011-2012 year.

The six BCS automatic qualifier conferences illustrated by their official logos **(Figure 4)**

Figure 4

Non-Automatic Qualifiers

Along with the six automatic qualifying conferences listed above, there are five additional BCS conferences, often referred to as Mid-Majors. The schools belonging to these conferences are eligible to participate in the coveted Bowl Championship Series but not guaranteed a spot for winning their conference title. These conferences are listed below:

BCS – Mid Major Conferences:

- Conference USA
- Mid-American Conference
- Mountain West Conference
- Sun Belt Conference
- Western Athletic Conference

Teams in these conferences can earn a spot in a BCS game by being the highest ranked team of the Mid Major conferences and holding a position in the top 12 of the final BCS poll or by being ranked in the top 16 and higher than a champion of an automatic qualifying conference.

Network Television Contracts

The current television contracts with associated revenue packages for all six BCS conferences and the Mountain West Conference are referenced below**.** The financial importance of these broadcast arrangements cannot be overemphasized as clearly evidenced by the figures shown

- **SEC**

  ESPN/15 years/$2.25 billion/Expires 2023-24

  CBS/15 years/$825 million/Expires 2023-24

- **Big Ten**

  Big Ten Network/25 years/$2.8 billion/Expires 2031-32

  ABC/ESPN/10 years/$1 billion/Expires 2016

  CBS/10 years/$20 million/Expires 2018-19* (*basketball)*

- **ACC**

  ABC/ESPN/12 years/$1.86 billion/Expires 2022-23

  Raycom Sports/10 years/$300 million/Expires 2010-11

- **Big 12**

  ABC/ESPN/Eight years/$480 million/Expires 2015-16

  Fox Sports Net/Four years/$78 million/Expires 2011-12

- **Pac-10**

  ABC/ESPN/Five years/$125 million/Expires 2011-12

  Fox Sports Net/Five years/$97 million/Expires 2011-12

  ABC/ESPN/Six years/$52.5 million/Expires 2011-12* *(basketball)*

- **Big East** -- ABC/ESPN/Six years/$200 million/Expires 2013

ANALYSES

The SEC

While the conferences exist for the main purpose of athletic competition, there is also a noticeable trend in region, history and academic prowess between member institutions. Conference strength, in a competitive sense, is extremely important for a BCS automatic qualifying conference. This reputation can lead to more lucrative television contracts and higher revenue to be shared amongst members. While every conference has its star programs, some are more prominent than others. Popular opinion shows by most knowledgeable college football fans will tell you the Southeastern Conference (SEC) is the strongest conference (in football) from top to bottom (Tamanaha, 2010). It is difficult to argue against that sentiment as at the time of this report, the SEC boasts six BCS national championships in football, including the previous four in a row, dating from the 2005-2006 season to the 2009-2010 season (www.bcsfootball.org, 2010).

The SEC has a strong brand image as the toughest, fastest, and best football conference in the country and is the closest resemblance to the National Football League in college on a continual basis. Almost every contest can be considered some sort of rivalry game due to the intense emotions shared by fans and alumni alike. Not surprisingly, due to the SEC's image and product, they are in high demand and command a large portion of ratings with their football games. The SEC also boasts the strongest television deal in college athletics, featuring a partnership with both ESPN and CBS running currently through the 2023-2024 season. During this contract, every week CBS hosts an "SEC Game of the Week", plus two double-headers and the SEC championship game. ESPN controls the rights to approximately 400 events a year across their media empire, consisting of ESPN, ESPN2, ESPNU, ESPN3.com, ESPN Classic and the SEC Network. ESPN has acquired the rights to every SEC home football game (excluding those on the CBS network broadcast package) and serves as the exclusive national cable home and the syndication rights holder for the conference. With such a popular product offering extensive content, the SEC has been highly successful at profiting. The conference earned $209 million in revenue generated from television and advertising during the 2009-2010 year alone (Fowler, 2010).

The SEC Digital Network, consisting of SECsports.com, SEC Video, SEC Nation, SEC Mobile, SECU, SEC Downloads, and SEC Gameday provides fans with a variety of content offerings. The SEC Video online platform delivers on-demand access to full games, highlights, archives, features, and more. In addition, Sirius/XM Satellite Radio provides coverage of every SEC football game through the 2012 season, as well as most SEC men's basketball games and selected women's basketball and baseball games. (http://www.secsports.com, 2010) With this much content and media exposure as well as the SEC's reputation and ratings strength, the SEC is a popular brand for other brands to associate with through sponsorship and advertising. The SEC has affiliations with over 17 corporate sponsors including brands like AT&T, Allstate, UPS, and Gatorade (http://www.secsports.com, 2010) However, for all its athletic exploits, the SEC brand also has a negative connotation, as the weakest academically of the power conferences.

The Big Ten

The Big Ten conference (which actually consists of 11 members) is another power conference holding a reputation of strong academics as well as athletics. The Big Ten is the oldest Division 1 athletic conference and leads all others in total amount of research expenditures. The league is one of only two conferences (the other being the Div III University

Athletic Association) in which every member institution belongs to the prestigious Association of American Universities; a collection of over 60 of the top research universities in the country. In addition, every member of the conference belongs to the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) along with the University of Chicago (http://www.cic.net, 2010).

Membership in the CIC is indeed a coveted association. The CIC on average bestows 15% of the Ph.D. degrees in the United States. CIC members engage in $6 billion in funded research, receiving approximately 12 percent of the total federal research funds awarded annually (18 percent of the National Science Foundation total, and 15.7 percent of the U.S. Department of Agriculture total). Collectively, CIC institutions employ more than 29,000 full-time faculty members and enroll approximately 400,000 undergraduate and graduate students. (http://www.cic.net, 2010).

In 2007 the Big Ten Network was launched, offering 24-hour comprehensive coverage of all things associated with Big Ten athletics. The first of its kind, the network currently reaches an estimated 40 million households nationwide, and 73 million households when coupled with its Canadian distribution. It is the first network dedicated to covering a single collegiate conference as well as the first to be internationally distributed. Every year the network offers approximately 35-40 football games, 105 regular season men's basketball games, 55 women's basketball games, as well as Big Ten Championship events, daily studio shows, coaches' shows, and classic contests. The network is carried nationally on DirectTV and Dish Network, as well as a regional distribution with over 300 providers, which puts it in 19 of the countries top 20 markets (http://www.bigtennetwork.com, 2010).

The network has been a huge success since its launch. It was created to provide the conference with more national exposure for Big Ten sports while enhancing its existing television agreements with its other television partners (http://www.bigtennetwork.com, 2010). The conference sought to have stronger control of their advertising environment in which its events were aired (the network accepts no alcohol or gambling advertising). The conference also desired to dramatically increase exposure for both non-revenue and women's sports, which previously had not been widely televised; as well as improving distribution for non-marquee football and men's basketball games that until that time, were available only on a local or regional basis. The Big Ten Network became the first network in cable or satellite television history to reach 30 million subscribers within its first 30 days on the air (http://www.bigtennetwork.com, 2010).

Conference Shifts and Turmoil

The term strength in numbers can be applied to many industries with college athletics certainly being no exception. To be in one of the Big Six conferences is a powerful resource for a university. The ability to go to a BCS bowl year in and year out, take part in lucrative revenue sharing amongst your league brethren, and earn the respect of the rest of the nation for being associated with other high ranking and similar institutions, is appealing to most schools. As college athletics continues to become a highly profitable industry, the chance for a conference to expand and grow will continue to be explored and acted upon within reason. This will invariably lead to public relations and issue management conflicts within and between conferences.

The reasons to expand conferences are numerous and singular at the same time. There needs to be a fit between academic standards and goals, and a comparable, competitive balance. Region can also factor in to the equation, although it is becoming less important than it has been in the past. Today, the travel expenditure for a football team can cost millions, but the revenue generated by the game exceeds the operating expenses despite the fact that a football team plays an average of six to seven away games a year. This can become more of a concern for the non-revenue sports, some of which (like baseball) have a very high number of away games in a season. Yet simply put, conference expansion like so many other things is all about the bottom line… money. Money is generated by television, and the most effective way to increase your television viewership, is to penetrate new markets.

Along with entering new markets, The Pac 10 and Big Ten also sought additional members in order to create a conference championship game. Per NCAA rules, a conference must have a minimum of 12 members in order to play a conference championship. The Pac 10 and Big Ten have long coveted adding members in order to play a conference championship between the season's top two teams, instead of awarding the title to the team with the best record in league play, as is the current process. This additional game would lead to millions of dollars in additional revenue for the conferences as well as exposure and furthering the conference profile.

In June 2010 the Big 12, despite being one of the premiere athletic conferences in the country, lost two of its core members. Within a matter of days, the University of Nebraska announced its departure for the Big Ten conference, while the University of Colorado, along with the University of Utah accepted invitations to join the Pac 10. Boulder, the hometown to the University of Colorado, individually does not rank highly in the television market-share arena. However, nearby Denver, a city with a large University of Colorado alumni and fan base is the 17th largest television market (http://bizjournals.com, 2010) in the nation. Conversely, Nebraska is a strong national brand, possessing a large fan base and wealth of history and tradition. Big Ten-commissioner Jim Delaney compares the Cornhuskers in the Big Ten to the

Green Bay Packers in the NFL. Both share a small market but enjoy a national brand and following (http://www.freep.com, 2010). Nebraska's leadership decided the appeal of the Big Ten's lucrative television contract, plus the prestige of belonging to the CIC was an offer they could not afford to pass. The Big 12's conference insurrection, along with the prospect of a new Pac 10 contract pending, led Colorado to seek other opportunities to be found in the Pac 10.

This left the Big 12 in a difficult situation. The remaining member's fans and alumni had strong opinions on how to proceed, not always agreeing with the leadership of their institutions. The Pac 10 extended an invitation to Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, Oklahoma and Oklahoma State in hopes to create the first 16 team, "super conference" and thus guaranteeing a lucrative television contract. While this seemed like the most likely scenario, Texas A&M remained the lone holdout amidst rumors they were entertaining the SEC as a future suitor. These plans left the Universities of Kansas, Kansas State, Missouri, Iowa State, and Baylor scrambling in attempts to find a home of their own should the Big 12 dissolve. The impending scenario was especially detrimental for Baylor and Iowa State as their stay in a BCS conference seemed like it was coming to an end. In the end, a new deal was struck to keep the remaining Big 12 teams together by centering the deal around the conferences biggest brands -- Texas, Texas A&M and Oklahoma.

The new profit sharing package reportedly will allot splits of $20 million in television revenue between Texas, Texas A&M and Oklahoma. The remaining seven schools would receive an estimated total between $14-$17 million dollars, a substantial increase from their previous intake of between $8-$13 million. While some may question the unequal revenue sharing, the fact of the matter remains, Texas, Texas A&M and Oklahoma are stronger brands than the remaining Big 12 schools. Texas and Oklahoma have unequivocally been the bedrocks of the Big 12's clout as a power conference. The two schools have combined for 12 out of a possible 14 appearances in the Dr. Pepper Big 12 Championship, winning the conference nine times (Oklahoma - six, Texas - three). They have played in 11 BCS bowls including one national championship each since the inception of the BCS. Their claim to larger revenue distribution due to their success and strong national brands is undoubtedly warranted. The inclusion of Texas A&M however, left some scratching their heads. While most fans recognize that Texas A&M's history is a proud and strong one, their recent football records have left little to be desired. Other schools in the conference such as Texas Tech and Missouri have produced a noticeably better product in recent years yet were not able to leverage the money that A&M secured. Texas A&M successfully used its image, history and fan base to its advantage, securing a larger portion of revenue in the new conference sharing system.

The Big 12 remained intact, ready to stand behind its foundation of Texas, Texas A&M and Oklahoma. These 3 school's brand power, alumni base, and stranglehold on two of the top ten television markets in the country in Houston and Dallas/Fort Worth all factored in to the "saving" of the conference, although one in particular, stands taller than the rest.

The Eyes are Upon Texas

Months before the dissension in the Big 12 came to a head, rumors began to circulate that the Big Ten was preparing to proposition the University of Texas as a prospective member. Preemptively, this seemed illogical and perplexing; however, when examined closer it did indeed make sense. Although not a regional fit with the primarily northern Midwest centered Big Ten, Texas would be more than welcomed into the conference. The University of Texas is arguably the strongest brand in college athletics, and unequivocally the richest. In 2006, even before their upset victory over the University of Southern California for the BCS National Championship, Texas boasted the most profitable football program in the country. With a revenue stream of $53.2 million and a profit margin of $38.7 million, Texas saw a *higher* profit from its football team than all but eight of the other bowl eligible teams combined (Isidore, 2006).

Texas's athletic aptitude along with their reputation as one of the highest ranked universities academically was enticing to the Big Ten's leadership, and for Texas, the Big Ten's contract was much more appealing than their current deal within the Big 12. The thought of adding the strong national brand, athletic prowess and entrance into the media markets that Texas controls; as well as the ability to play a conference championship game, all seemed like a home run for the Big Ten. Texas however, had other plans. More rumors began to circulate that Texas had been exploring the option of launching their own sports channel. It would parallel the structure of the highly successful Big Ten network launched before it with the exception that it would not concentrate on an entire conference. This one would be all Texas, all the time.

A University of Texas network became the core negotiation piece when Texas entered into discussions with both the Big Ten and Pac 10. It became clear, that this was an idea that the universities leadership had been considering for several years. When the Pac 10 and Big Ten became reluctant to offer such a provision, the Big 12 seemed more than happy to grant them the option, knowing full well that if Texas left, the Big 12 would cease to exist. Texas accepted the offer, and now stands on the cusp of athletic and television history as they prepare to launch the Longhorn Sports Network.

The phrase everything is bigger in Texas certainly rings true when discussing the flagship university of the state. The University of Texas has an enrollment of over 51,000 students and an equally large alumni base. It is one of the wealthiest and best-known universities in the world. The Longhorns are arguably the most popular brand in college sports, and possess some of the most widely recognized symbols in the country including the Longhorn logo, the unique burnt orange color scheme, Bevo, the fully grown longhorn steer mascot, and the "Hook 'em Horns" hand sign. Despite their impressive resume and market demand, the Longhorn Network is a scrutinized decision that leaves some questioning its viability. While the channel would focus on all things Longhorn related, there would be very little actual live broadcasts of football and men's basketball games, with those rights already being held by ABC/ESPN, and Fox Sports. A select few could make their way onto the network, but they would most likely be less desirable games and not ratings grabbing conference and rivalry matches. Regardless, Texas remains convinced that a network that caters to its vast fan base is a practical one due to the massive following of the Longhorns. Such deep affinity towards universities' athletic teams is important to identify and utilize when making decisions like the one made by the Texas administration. Understanding the psychological and emotional aspects of fandom can help an organization, be it a school, a conference or a network, make the most informed and rewarding decisions when deciding how to move forward with their brand and product(s).

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Theoretical Underpinnings

Conference shuffling is becoming a more standard and accepted part of the college athletic landscape. Conferences desire to strengthen their brand image, is directly correlated to increasing revenue from sponsors. Likewise, if a school can improve upon its product and influence its way into a more lucrative position with a stronger conference, they are certainly going to take the necessary steps to advance their standing in the market. The organizational structure must be braced for change and whatever conflicts may arise, as with any industry seeking out new and better opportunities.

When it comes to individuals and their identification with colleges as fans, the basis is a desire for belonging. The combination of school spirit, allegiance and affiliation, and shared sense of community, help to explain the mass appeal. A phenomenon not lost on marketers when attempting to align and help sell products through the use of the college sports medium. Understanding the popularity and our reasons to associate with a program helps to maximize marketing opportunities as well as furthering the potential for future business.

To fully understand the popularity of college athletics, it is necessary to further explore the relationships between fans and their identities in a social context, as well as how they cultivate their allegiances into consumption of certain media outlets. Stewart and Pavlou (2009) stated “the attitudes of consumers toward a specific medium can radically altar how that medium affects the consumer and any marketing communication it carries” (p. 367). While America as a whole has a strong love affair with sports in general, the passion and pageantry expressed towards intercollegiate athletics is a widespread phenomena. While in professional sports, loyalty can be bought and sold, abandoned and regained; collegiate fans tend to feel a connection that has deeper roots (Wann and Branscombe, 1993).

Social Identity Theory

Sports fan identification was first explored by Kagan, (1958) investigating the concept that fans identify themselves with their favorite sports team and respond emotionally against their rivals. Tajfel added on to this concept with the introduction of social categorization (1974). Taking a stance that mere awareness and association within a group is adequate enough to build a groupthink mentality of discrimination and dislike against contradictory groups. People's motivation for positive social identity produces "a drive for in-group superiority as the sequence of social categorization-social identity-social comparison-positive in-group distinctiveness" (Turner, 1999, p. 8). In the case of the University of Texas and the proposed Longhorn Network, social identity theory can explain the expected market value of the channel. Texas has an already large built in fan base in their alumni and families, as well as the fans that feel a connection with the school due to its strong reputation of athletics, academics and role as the flagship university of one of the most populous states in the country. People often attempt to belong and feel connections with groups they evaluate as better than others (Young, 2002). Given this mentality, Texas has an opportunity to distribute their athletic products to a greater audience; who in turn process the media exposure into connectivity with the University and its teams. Texas has the opportunity to further their brand's strength and reach while providing a platform to showcase sports and other University aspects that may not have previously received the same attention and awareness. When analyzing our selective exposure to media, the element of achieving a positive social identity might be an important motive for choosing media content

(Harwood and Roy, 2005). This is the chief concept that Texas is relying upon to sell their product through its own network.

Social identity theory further describes team identification, defined as “the extent to which a fan feels a psychological connection to a team and the team’s performances are viewed as self-relevant” (Wann, 2006, p. 332). Team loyalty, as explained by James, Kolbe, and Trail (2002) is a psychological association with a team, expanded on as a social identity that groups of people have in common in relation to their favorite sports team. The subject translates well from a psychological theory, to an application of business and communication theory and practice. To expand on their social identities through sports, fans have a drive to consume any and as many channels as they can, especially in the ever-expanding role of media. An aspect that the Big Ten aimed to capitalize upon with the Big Ten Network, and now being followed by the model the proposed Longhorn Network will attempt to recreate.

Hundley & Billings (2009) explore the various identities that groups have towards their teams, with categories such as gender, race, national identity, and self and social identities, all shaped and fed upon by the consumption and drive for an expanding sports media culture.

Social Identity theory takes on a new dimension in regards to the SEC. The conference as a whole produces arguably the bitterest rivalries in college athletics. Week in and week out, from top to bottom in the conference there is widespread dissent for any team that is not your own (Dietz-Uhler and Murrell, 1999). Despite the shared resentments of fan bases towards each other, the conference itself is a group, which as a whole is a large shared collective of individuals. A widespread practice by SEC member’s fans is the chanting of the conference’s name in bowl games. Rather than cheering for their own individual team, the communal effort to express their association as members of the strongest conference, leads to additional self-confidence, esteem and positive group distinction (Sloan, 1989).

Raney (2006) suggested four motivations for sports consumption: emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and social. According to Raney, team allegiance is influenced by family, friends, previous associations, and perceived popularity among the masses. This is even more so in respect to college affiliation. Lineage and legacy can result in a family's unbridled support for their school. The strong emotional ties that alumni feel towards their school's program translate well for the business side of collegiate sports. Traditionally collegiate fans are a higher educated market, with disposable income. The notion that purchasing and consuming as much as possible in regards to their team, leads to a deeper connection and stronger social identity within their group (Kwon and Armstrong, 2006). The deeper the attachment to a team as a fan, the more likely an individual will be to spend money as an attempt to feel a connection with other fans and the team itself (Taylor, 1999). This is the basis for the bowl game system. It is a chance for a group to come together and expand upon their collective identity by supporting their team. Additionally, it is an effort to show dominance over those that differ from their own group and mentality while spending money on travel expenses, tickets, concessions, and merchandise in the hopes of an increased positive identity and association through the team/school.

Disposition Theory in Sports

Sports remain first and foremost, a popular form of entertainment. Bryant and Miron claimed, "The primary purpose of the preponderance of today's electronic media messages is entertainment" (2002, p. 549). Sports are essentially the ultimate drama. Team identification leads the consumer to have a predisposition on the roles of "antagonists" and "protagonists".

Naturally, your allegiance is to your team, which will be your perception of the protagonist, thus being the side to root for. Meanwhile the enemy is the opponent on the field, their fan base, their tradition and everything else they encompass as a whole.

The measurement of perceived enjoyment can be expressed by two propositions of disposition theory in sports, as explored by Zillman, Bryant, and Sapolsky (1979):

1.) Enjoyment derived from witnessing the success and victory of a competing party increases with positive sentiments and decreases with negative sentiments toward that party.
2.) Enjoyment derived from witnessing the failure and defeat of a competing party increases with negative sentiments and decreases with positive sentiments toward the party. (p. 312)

Not surprisingly, the theory leads to an assumption that winning leads to an increased enjoyed experience. While the outcome directly affects our satisfaction, the uncertainty is why we watch. The outcome is never guaranteed and the possibility of an underdog taking down a heavy favorite adds to the emotional wave that can take place in a game. While this can result in stress and eventually an emotional letdown, the game remains a form of enjoyment and entertainment, with the result either adding to, or adjusting the appropriate level of satisfaction (Wann, Schrader, and Adamson, 1998). The desire to watch and see the outcome has also led to televised sporting event's values increasing as far as advertising goes. Advertising has certainly been negatively affected by the rise and popularity of TIVO in the last few years (Trombino, 2006). Many people rather than watching a show live, will record them and watch the show at their own convenience at a later time, effectively limiting the role that commercials play and diminishing their value to advertisers. However, the one medium where this has not been the case is sports. People feel a need to watch games live, to see what unscripted drama could unfold **(**Isidore, 2004**).** Sport also bring out a wanton desire for community and social identity. Not only do we want to watch as it happens, but we want to watch it together or in a group setting, such as a bar or stadium **(**Isidore, 2004**)**. The desire for sports media consumption continues to grow paving the way for markets for entire networks dedicated to conferences and teams. Their value being increased as companies see them as a safe return on investment due to the guaranteed viewership of their products (Isidore, 2004).

Organizational Management and Moving Forward

Conflict is an unavoidable and expected development in almost any organization. To effectively prepare and handle conflict is a long debated and researched process that scholars and businesses alike continue to seek the most steadfast, cost effective and minimalist approach to any and all situations that can cause discord within an organization (Kahn, 2003).

Conflict is often brought to light in the public arena depending on how well known and powerful the organization/individuals are that constitute the differing sides, as well as the popularity of their products. In negotiation, it is not uncommon for one or both sides to make their stances public in an attempt to sway the opinion of the masses in their favor, effectively applying pressure to the other side(s). While not always by choice, often conflict is recognized by media outlets, which play a vital role in both the explanation and presentation of the issue at hand (Severin and Tankard, 1997). The media can prevent the conflict from escalating; therefore it is imperative that all parties involved enhance their public relations departments to be media savvy and have a controlled grasp on any situational dilemma. Conflict, especially in the sports arena has followed a recent trend as being welcomed fodder for media outlets, leading to a greater desire for conflict from said mediums.

The unrest in the Big 12 led to anger from many differing sides on several different issues. Organizational management came into question and was scrutinized heavily. When operating a large organization, such as the Big 12, the contingency approach to management may be an effective method, advocating there is no complete and best way to manage every situation, instead opting for careful analysis of situations as they arise and build organically. The theory suggests that individual features of a system will depend on the specific circumstances in which an organization finds itself (Hahn, 2007).

In the last ten years, there have been a flood of teams accepting invitations to join new conferences, leaving there former ones scrambling to find suitable replacements. Finding these however, is no easy task. Several factors go into what constitutes a good or natural fit between schools and conferences. But as the dynamic of college athletics further shifts towards big business fueled by television revenue, one thing remains clear, conferences will continue to grow and seek expansion. This will lead to further conflict and insurrection between powerful entities in a very public forum. Crisis and issue management will be at the forefront of college athletics, as more and more headlines will be grabbed off the field rather than on it. Universities, athletic departments, conferences and networks, will need to continue to be proactive in their preparation for any and all situations that arise.

Conclusion

College athletics simply put is big business. The numbers and figures presented in this article show a staggering growth in popularity and viewership. Research conducted by the social identity theory shows the strong connection and emotion we derive from being fans and the way that our own college affiliations shape our individual distinctiveness as well as our desire for the group dynamic. With such a popular product, marketers, advertisers and third party licensing and apparel companies stand to continue to profit heavily from association and partnerships with teams, conferences, and bowl games alike. The marketing potential is almost limitless when it comes to something that Americans love so much. With any business, an organization has to act in the best interest of its constituents, and certainly conferences and athletic departments are no different. In an age where the "closest school to your own" ideology no longer defines conference affiliation, rather "what partnerships stand to help us increase our own revenue?" Administration and marketers will continue to seek out opportunity wherever it may be found, resulting in greater media involvement, extended and expanded content, and a public anxious to consume it.

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